DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 086 CS 214 284

AUTHOR Whipple, Bob
TITLE From Other to Community: Making the Writing Center an All-University Facility.
PUB DATE Oct 92
NOTE 16p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Writing Centers Association (11th, St. Paul, MN, October 2-3, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Collegiality; *Content Area Writing; *Higher Education; *Writing Laboratories; Writing Workshops
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse Communities; Faculty Attitudes; Teacher Empowerment

ABSTRACT

Writing centers and their faculty are often considered to be "Others" because they have both power and no power--they have the ability to make a difference in students' writing abilities, but they are often excluded because they are seen as a "fixit," a clinic, a lab, an ancillary. Writing center faculty need to take more power so that they can exercise more power, and, in so doing, give more power to the university writing community. Writing centers must educate the university in writing center theory, function, and aims--in the purpose of writing in a university--so that the center can be a place where the whole university can come together. Specific academic departments could set up workshops in teaching writing with the assistance of writing program and writing center staff. From there, writing programs can move to the grand step--encouraging and assisting in the planning and proposals for writing centers in different departments or areas. Obstacles include the resistance of other faculty members and the paradox of preparing students more definitively in the conventions of their own discourse (thus creating difference by attempting community). Writers in the disciplines will not always have to go to the English department's writing center for help if writing forces exist in their own programs. Writing centers will have plenty to do in sharing their abilities with the rest of the university so that all can benefit from that sharing. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 369 086

Bob Whipple
Department of English
Creighton University
Omaha, NE 68178
402/280-2534
Internet: rhetoric@creighton.edu

From Other to Community: Making the Writing Center an All-University Facility

In the August 1992 issue of Imprimis, a publication of Michigan's Hillsdale College, Shelby Steele, English professor at San Jose State, and commentator on the issues of race in contemporary society, comments on forces that tend to make developing groups celebrate their sense of Other-ness, of separation, rather than their potential for inclusion and empowerment. Steele asserts that these forces harm rather than help these groups. To bid for power as an Other, he argues, is to emphasize separation rather than community. Far better it is, he implies, to achieve power on the basis of equality and community rather than on the basis of difference.

More recently, the 20th-Century Studies Conference at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee entitled "Pedagogy: The Question of the Personal" mentions, as issues to be addressed, student at Other, teacher as Other, disembodied authority, and teacher-student relations.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
R. Whipple
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

CS214284

Such considerations of Otherness, of marginalizing, of separation vs. community, exclusion and inclusion, are very important in college pedagogy, and especially in writing pedagogy. We have, in the writing classroom, been working in ways toward the erasure of such distinctions for some time. Peer editing, peer tutoring, and collaborative writing blur the distinction between the role of teacher and the role of learner. In such situations we encourage students to master their writing processes rather than accepting pronouncements from on high. The students benefit; they gain the ability to act as their own teachers, to master a variety of writing abilities in a social, communal setting.

But the writing classroom is often a thing unto itself. Writing centers are not--or at least they shouldn't be. In the composition class, we are working toward establishing community. But are we establishing community in, or through the writing center? More to the point, are we establishing as broad a community as we can--one that can encompass the whole university? Or are we acceding to the Othering structures in the university that make us a marginalized force? Can we work from within to make the Others wandering out there part of us--a

community working toward writing instruction and abilities?

I'll try to address some of these issues, to explain what all this has to do with writing centers, how considerations of Us and Other affect them, how the relationship between the University and the Writing Center is analogous to that between the student and teacher.

The answers to these issues are tied up in the concept of community. I'd like to tell you how Othering exists within the Writing Center's relationship with the University, how I think it can be eradicated, and what I hope the end result can be.

Let's look at what an Other is in the first place. Otherness, as I use the term, is a matter of exclusion (and I realize that this term can be used very broadly or narrowly; I use it in a narrow, social/communal sense). To be an Other is either to exclude or to be excluded; that is, one is an Other if one is excluded. One also becomes an Other to that Other if one is doing the exclusion, for Othering involves both the power to exclude/include and the state of exclusion/inclusion.

There's nothing necessarily inherently distasteful about Otherness. Indeed, such

distinctions may be necessary for social interaction, public order, and civil security. But the kind of Otherness that occurs in the sphere of the University's use of the writing center--indeed, its mission to cause persons to write well--is this kind of Otherness necessary? Or have we consigned our students and ourselves to some kind of intellectual apartheid?

Let's look at the different knowledge-building communities--the different Others, rather, in a University. The most obvious Others are the faculty (both within and without the English department). They are Others because of what they possess--power, prestige, and a commodity known as experience. They are separated by their perceived expertise and knowledge. They--I should say we--have a distinguishing mark--the M.A. or Ph.D. Characterized by degree, by knowledge, by institutional status granted over 1000 years of tradition, these Others are most likely to remain Others.

The next group of Others are the students. Any kind of student status, from undergraduate to graduate, medical, law, or technical, classifies one as a student Other. Students are Others for what they have not got. They haven't got power,

prestige, or experiential or classroom knowledge. They are, traditionally, and I think ironically, trying to acquire a mantle of knowledge to become the top Other, rather than the bottom Other.

An important subgroups of Others, though, is those Others who send students to the writing centers. These persons can be Others for what they have and what they do not have--that is, they have the power that can allow them to send students to the writing center, the power of authority, the power of the grade. They do not, however, have the power of being to effectively tutor the student's writing needs themselves. Thus they send the students to the Writing Center--another Other.

Writing Centers and their faculty are Others because they have both power and no power. They have the ability to make a difference in students' writing abilities, to make things clear for them so that they can make things clear for others. But they are excluded because they are often seen as a fixit, a clinic, a lab, an ancillary. They are excluded because their role is misunderstood.

It's time to change that role, and take more power so that we can exercise more power and, in so doing, give more power to the University writing community.

The Writing Center can be a force through which Otherness may be erased, such distinctions subsumed in the commonalty of the writing community. My point is this: we are all writers. Let's all become a writing community through the writing center.

How? Not, perhaps, by working in the ways that many writing centers work. Writing centers are responsible to the University's society, as they are where the university locates its writing emphases. This location is good when the center promotes writing across the curriculum, but bad when the center becomes a dumping ground where students are simply sent to the center by a teacher who is dissatisfied with the way a student is writing. They are "sick" Others, going to the center, in the now famous analogy, to get cured--or to metaphorically die unnoticed.

So far I've painted a pretty bleak picture, and I don't mean to be pessimistic. But we can jog along the way we are going, relatively happy, I guess, and tutor those who are Others, sent by those who are Others, which makes us Others ourselves. Perhaps it's just me--and I don't think it is--but as a faculty member I bridle a little bit when I am placed in an exclusionary, restrictive category without being given the power to change that

situation. and I feel--we should all feel--sympathy and indignation on the part of the students who should resist being Othered, but cannot because of the unequal position in which they are placed.

Do I sound angry? I assure you I am not. I am, though, keenly aware of the strongly held belief that in writing, meaning is made not in a vacuum but in a communities. In classes we build communities all the time. We have been building writing communities, believing in the communal building of knowledge and writing ability, for ten years now. Collaborative writing, peer grouping and peer editing, team editing, grading, and writing are in our departments. When are we going to get all this outside our departments and our classrooms?

Writing Centers must educate the University in writing center theory, function, and aims--in the purpose of writing in a university--so that the center can be a place where the whole university can come together. According to Stephen North, "Writing centers are simply one manifestation...of a dialogue about writing that is central to higher education" (440). This dialogue must include "evangelizing" the university and changing some attitudes. We too often tell people what they want to hear to get bodies in the place. But now, on many campuses,

we've got 'em hooked. Now let's draw the line in and get 'em in the boat with us.

Tilly and John Warnock speak of the "revision of the instructor" wherein the writing teacher, realizing her status as a writer, helps students "authors and authorities of their own texts" (17-18). Distinctions are blurred; no one is compelled to stand and lecture (18). It's a dialectical kind of situation. Warnock and Warnock state that "the [writing center tutor/teacher] is not a traditional teacher/evaluator but a person who assists writers by listening and reading, by helping students imagine an audience, form intentions, and realize them" (18).

Can we effect a revision of the instructor in non-writing center faculty? Can we help our colleagues in Physics, Engineering, Art or Sociology do what we do? Yes. It can be done. Obviously beating persons over the head won't get us anywhere.

Until recently the attitude at the university where I teach was largely absent altogether. The University realized it had a writing mission, but other than stating that fact, and expecting the English department to do something about it, nothing else was done--other, perhaps, than requesting--not requiring--that other courses contain a "substantial

writing requirement". As a result, the English department was the Other to whom the rest of the University sent its students. But we have a new curriculum, arrived at by three years of sweat and agony--more or less. In it is not only a charge to writing skills, but required, delineated courses for these skills to be taught, ones that each student must take. Obviously painting a label on a class won't make it a writing class. But we're getting to that point, finally.

Writing centers at many schools are full to capacity right now, and are likely to remain so. We can ask the other elements of the University to provide money to help the operating expenses of our centers--the chief of which is, of course, faculty salaries. And you can guess what the initial reaction to this may be.

But it could also be proposed that specific departments set up, with the assistance of writing program and writing center faculty, workshops in teaching writing. The primary aim would be to show the difference between the current-traditional models we suspect many cling to out of lack of knowledge, and introduce them to a more process-centered view of the writing process. (I should mention here that we've tried to overcome some of

the initial resistance to this idea at my university, for example, by throwing open the doors of the writing center to faculty for their own writing tasks. The response, while proportionately small, has been very vocal and positive. Our rationale is that if we can plant a few tutorially-minded and process-centered converts in the midst of the faculty, that the zeal of the converted will help us.)

From there, writing programs can move to the grand step--encouraging and assisting in the planning and proposals for writing centers in different departments or areas, such as social sciences, natural sciences, business administration, law, medicine, and so on. These small facilities can provide tutorial help in manipulating and creating texts within those fields--they will arguably be better able to help students enter into what Mary Kupiec Cayton calls "the conventions of the various discourse communities into which they seek entry as educated persons in our culture" (651).

I should also note the importance of this possibility to schools such as law and medicine, many of whose faculty often tell writing teachers that they need students who can write but can't get

them. They're part of the University. Should we serve them any less? This may be the only way that they'll get any writing center help at all.

Of course, there will be problems. This type of proposal will not work overnight; it may not work after 2,3,or 5 years. Look how long it got English departments to stop--some of them--from teaching formal grammar. We have a long way to go. One obstacle is the epistemological paradox of preparing students more definitively in the conventions of their own discourse communities, which, as Cayton notes, "differentiate their practitioners from lay speakers [and non practitioners] as professionals deserving of privelege and status" (652)--i.e., it makes them Others. How ironic that we might create difference by attempting community.

Another of the most difficult obstacles will, of course, be the resistance, mulishness, and obstinacy of other faculty. Perhaps, though, that a little resistance or confusion wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. "Paradoxically", says Tharon Howard, "resistance and conflict are required to maintain" a discourse community" (xxii) because the communal impulse, built through communication, is partially a function od disagreement and agreement, of negotiation, compromise, and "resistance and

accommodation" (xxii). Perhaps, then, our mediation with the University's other diverse elements can begin to make us a community within this definition of a community--perhaps not at the beginning of the process, but at the point where both sides begin to work together.

Is this situation going to mean that the English department will no longer be the Mecca for writers? In a word, yes. Writers in the disciplines will not always have to go to the English department's writing center for help if writing forces exist in their own programs. This will undoubtedly cause consternation in English departments, writing centers, and other English controlled facilities. Let's face it, we've got a vested interest in the writing business. We don't want to lose our constituency. But if we set ourselves up as the only arbiters of the writing process, we are making ourselves the Authority and everyone else an Other. Interestingly enough, Warnock and Warnock recommend that the writing center remain an "outsider", that it "remain on the fringes of the academic community" (22). I find I don't agree--for one thing, believe that as a fringe element we can have much success in the revision of other faculty in the university. We need to become

part of the mainstream--or make them part of us--before we can work on the other faculty. For if we remain a marginalized Other, and prefer, to borrow the example I borrowed at the beginning of this essay from Shelby Steele, to celebrate our status as an Other, how can we effect community? We would, I think, be reinforcing, again, the epistemological xenophobia that causes us so much trouble in the first place.

And I really don't think that we'll be working ourselves out of a job, anyway. I think we'll have plenty to do in sharing our abilities with the rest of the University so that we can benefit from that sharing. It's time for us--and Others--to quit being superior; it's time for us to help others be superior writers, too. One colleague and E-mail correspondent tells me that he hopes that writing teachers will be different from other faculty, and will "continue to identify themselves with all who teach writing [and I would add, with all who write] and not see themselves as a separate class" (McDonald).

Isn't that the reason for Writing Centers in the first place?

Works Cited

Cayton, Mary Kupiec. "Writing as Outsiders: Academic Discourse and Marginalized Faculty." College English 53.6 (October 1991): 647-660.

Howard, Tharon. The Rhetoric of Electronic Communities. Diss. Purdue University 1992.

McDonald, Jim. "Re: 'Othering' of Graduate Students." Message to: Multiple recipients of PURTOPOI [electronic bulletin board] 1002 Sept 19, 12:46 pm; Message no.:9209191746.AA06543.

North, Stephen. "The Idea of a Writing Center." College English 46.5 (November 1984): 433-446.

Steele, Shelby. "The New Segregation." Imprimis 21.8 (August 1992): 1-4.

Warnock, Tilly, and John Warnock. "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers." in Writing Centers: Theory and Administration. ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1984. 16-23.

CS

NOTE

This essay was originally delivered, in slightly different form, at the October 1992 annual Midwest Writing Centers Association Conference in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Robert D. Whipple, Jr.